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ABSTRACT

This theme issue for people working in the field of adult literacy focuses on the impact of learning disabilities (LD) on an adult's social skills. It explores various social, emotional, and daily living concerns which adults with learning disabilities may face. The following articles are included: (1) "Social Skills and Adults with Learning Disabilities" by Henry B. Reiff, which discusses the critical importance of social skills; (2) "Counseling Students with Learning Disabilities" by Dale S. Brown, which includes six tips for working with people having social skills deficits; (3) "Workplace Social Skills: Do Your Students Measure Up?" by Sherry DeMoss, which reports a study identifying specific workplace social skill requirements; (4) "Techniques To Generally Improve Social Skills in the Workplace" by Nancie Payne, which lists 13 techniques; (5) "Developing Strategic Social Skills" by Robert Crawford, which offers a self-help list of useful strategies for LD adults; (6) "Dealing with Learning Disabilities in Relationships" by Brita Miller, which offers suggestions for both the LD individual and his/her partner; and (7) "Remembering the Adolescent Years" by Barbara Cordoni and Tara Cordoni-Ely, in which a mother and her daughter with LD offer their views of family life during adolescence. (Contains 16 references or selected readings.) (DB)

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Linking Literacy & Learning Disabilities

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Social Skills Issues

From the Director . . .

Adults with learning disabilities may not only have had problems learning in a classroom, but may also have found it difficult to learn and acquire appropriate social skills. Current research suggests that there is a high prevalence of social skill deficits among individuals with learning disabilities. Because adults with learning disabilities may perceive and respond to social situations differently than the rest of the population, social skill deficits can have a devastating impact on family, school, work, community, and personal relationships. In addition, adults with persisting social skill difficulties may experience difficulty finding and/or keeping a job or developing intimate relationships. Therefore, it is critical to include social skills training in programs for adults with learning disabilities.

This issue of LINKAGES focuses on the impact of learning disabilities on an adult's social skills. It explores various social, emotional, and daily living concerns adults with learning disabilities may face. Individuals with learning disabilities who have social skills problems often face rejection and loneliness. By improving our understanding of social skills issues and instruction in social skill areas, it is our hope that adult educators and literacy providers can better meet the needs of adult learners who may have learning disabilities.

Neil A. Sturomski
Director

Social Skills and Adults with Learning Disabilities

By Henry B. Reiff

Have you ever encountered someone who didn't seem quite right? Was it the lack of a handshake when you extended your hand? Did he not make eye contact – or maybe makes too much? Or perhaps he hardly seemed to pay attention to what you were saying, abruptly changing the subject, focusing on irrelevant details, or not quite getting the overall gist of the conversation.

You might have wondered, "Is he ignoring me, making fun of me, or is he downright peculiar? Maybe there's something wrong with him." In any case, you probably did not want to continue your interaction.

Although people who seemingly behave strangely may make us feel uneasy, confused, or even a little angry, their behavior is not necessarily indicative of psychological or emotional imbalances. Instead, they may have problems with social skills – those subtle, complex codes of conduct we apply, often subconsciously, in our interactions with others. We may be biologically social creatures, but our specific conventions of social behavior are learned.

Some adults with learning disabilities find the acquisition and use of social skills to be elusive. The term "learning disability" tends to conjure images of problems with language, particularly reading and writing – although it can also apply to specific difficulties in math, reasoning, attention, and organizational abilities. The unifying theme of learning disabilities centers around some sort of deficit in processing information, and herein lies a major link to problems with social skills. For some adults with learning

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disabilities, the same cognitive style that makes it difficult to process language, for instance, also makes it difficult to process social information effectively. Someone who does not process spoken language well, either receptively or expressively or both, may be at risk for not understanding everything that is said, or not being able to express what he or she really means.

We not only depend on language to relate to other people, but we learn to interpret nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. We learn to make eye contact, to pay attention and express interest, to wait our turn, to respond appropriately. We learn how far or how close to stand to each other, and we learn how to gauge others' reactions to us. We also learn that these conventions of social intercourse are fluid and malleable. What's appropriate in one situation, or with one person, may not be appropriate in another. Although we may bumble and stumble here and there, learning how to act appropriately with others comes naturally to most of us, more or less. We may not have had social skills taught as part of our formal education, but we become adept through incidental learning.

Adults with learning disabilities may not have difficulties with language per se, but instead do not effectively process the nonverbal elements of social interaction. Nonverbal social perception plays an essential role in our ability to relate to one another: without it, our interpersonal functioning can be clumsy if not treacherous. Worsening their difficulties, individuals with nonverbal social perception deficits are often oblivious to their social clumsiness. Thus it is not surprising that many adults with learning disabilities do not understand why their social lives are less than satisfying.

Other characteristics associated with learning disabilities may contribute to social skills deficits. Problems with impulse control and distractibility (often associated with an attention deficit), reasoning (particularly in understanding cause and effect), defining problems, and evaluating consequences have a variety of implications in social situations. These individuals may be susceptible to engaging in socially maladaptive behavior, which, in extreme cases, may lead to criminal offenses. A disproportionate number of juvenile offenders have learning disabilities; a number of researchers believe that many of them get into trouble because they do not fully understand the implications of their inappropriate actions.

"I think that because I spent so much time on my studies, I had less time to spend in development of social graces, less time to develop just hanging out. I missed out on a part of living. Has it impacted my life to this day? Yeah, no question about the fact that it's helped mold my profile of social activity."

Other adults with learning disabilities may not have an inherent weakness with social skills but instead have been deprived of the opportunities to learn appropriate social conduct. They may have attended school in largely segregated settings that minimized social contact with their nondisabled peers, or they may have been socially rejected to a point where they simply did not participate in many social activities. And as one adult with learning disabilities explains, his very drive to succeed and be "normal" may have had a paradoxical effect socially: "I think that because I spent so much time on my studies, I had less time to spend in development of social graces, less time to develop just hanging out. I missed out on a part of living. Has it impacted my life to this day? Yeah, no question about the fact that it's helped mold my profile of social activity."

At this point you might think that all adults with learning disabilities suffer from social skills deficits. Beware of generalizations! Many adults with learning disabilities not only have more than adequate social skills: a good number of them consider their social skills to be a significant

compensation and a key to success. Adults with learning disabilities are frequently charming, suave, gregarious, likable, astute, even charismatic people.

Persons with learning disabilities are a very diverse group, and it is not surprising that many of them exhibit strong social skills. But for many others, some social interactions may be uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, or incomprehensible. They are often isolated, and they do not understand why. Can this situation change? Adults with learning disabilities who have social skills deficits can take advantage of several support systems. Numerous national, regional, and local organizations for adults with learning disabilities such as the Learning Disabilities Association of America, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), the National Network of Learning Disabled Adults, the Group for Independent Learning Disabled (GILD) of Maryland, and Marin County Puzzle People in California (to name but a few) offer a network of services and support that may help adults with learning disabilities understand and overcome many of their social skills deficits. Individual counseling may also be a good option: behaviorally-oriented therapy appears to be effective in helping people modify, change and improve their social skills. Finally, trusted friends and loved ones might help. Sensitive yet objective feedback, when requested, has led some adults with learning disabilities to recognize and even change social behaviors. Taking the initiative to change is not always an easy step, but it is the best way to start dealing with social skills.◆

Author's note: The quotations by adults with learning disabilities have appeared in two previous books.

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Henry B. Reiff is the Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Special Education, Director of the Academic Skills Center and 504 Services, and Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs at Western Maryland College. He is currently working on a book about highly successful adults with learning disabilities to be published by PRO-ED in 1995. His most meaningful accomplishment - in collaboration with his wife, Jacki - occurred this spring with the birth of their first child, Benjamin.

Counseling Students with Learning Disabilities on Social Skills

By Dale S. Brown

Many students in adult basic education classes face challenges that go beyond their problems with reading words. They may also have trouble "reading" facial expressions. For example, they might not connect a cheerful smile with happiness or connect a frown with displeasure. In situations like these, students may have inadequate social skills.

Social skills problems are often manifestations of learning disabilities. As more adults with learning disabilities are entering adult education and literacy programs, literacy service providers may notice that there are some students who have challenges getting along with others. And, unfortunately, that sometimes means these students may have trouble interacting with their service providers.

Because some adults with learning disabilities have perceptual problems, it is difficult for them to pick up the hidden rules that others know instinctively. The following are tips for working with students with social skills problems. It is important to remember that what is considered socially acceptable behavior varies from culture to culture. The ideas and theories behind these specific examples may be modified and used with most student populations.

1. **The student needs information about his/her difficulties and how these difficulties can affect his/her ability to get along with others.** During the initial screening process, include information on how learning disabilities can affect the student's ability to get along with others. For example, if students have trouble telling the difference between the "b" and "d" sound, they may also have trouble distinguishing between tones of voice. If they cannot see the difference between a "c" and an "o," they may not see the difference between a friendly smile and a frown.

2. **The student needs positive reinforcement.** People with learning disabilities struggle alone. Adults who are learning to read need to understand that each step forward deserves rejoicing. The journey from the valley to the plain is not less worthy than the journey up the mountain. Some students will put themselves down and reject your praise. In that case, break the negative cycle of low self-esteem by offering words of encouragement.

3. **Positive reinforcement must be realistic.** In some cases, students who have experienced a multitude of special services have often been overpraised or received praise that is based on lowered expectations. In this case, stick to reality. Students in this situation need to know that there is still a long journey ahead. They should feel pride, but the seed of pride should sprout hard work, not arrogance.

4. **Acknowledge the difficulties caused by learning disabilities.** Learning disabilities challenge students to organize their lives well and develop a strong social network. Unfortunately, because the disability is invisible, students are likely to be constantly blamed for their poor behavior when they are not able to meet the challenge. To counter this, compliment students on their strengths. For example, tell them you notice that they are always punctual or that their concentration is improving.

5. **Talk to the student about his/her behavior**. Be honest and respectful when you talk about what the student needs to do to improve his/her working relationship with you. Some people, particularly young adults with learning disabilities, are unaware of their effects on others. Be positive in your phrasing. State what you want to change and underemphasize what is going wrong. Show in your voice tone and body language the way that works and the way that doesn't work. Show the "good" way and the "bad" way. For example to demonstrate how to speak in a lower tone of voice, alternate your voice from a quiet tone to a loud tone.

6. **Consider organizing a social group of your students.** Poor social skill networks and isolation are a major challenge facing many people with learning disabilities. Consider starting a support group or social activity group. Your local Learning Disabilities Association of America may be helpful. Or a volunteer could be found through one of the volunteer clearinghouses. This endeavor is also worthy of

staff time. Social skills are as important to success as academic skills. The networking that goes on in such a group can help the students and provide valuable "alumni" support to the center at a later time.

Helping students learn to get along with you and with others can make a huge difference in their future. Learning about the particular challenges faced by these students can cause you to feel rewarded even if they are students with whom others find it "unrewarding" to work. Help your students to learn social skills and you will assist them for the rest of their lives.◆

In the early eighties, Dale S. Brown was among the first people with learning disabilities who challenged the field to take on the issue of social skills. She has been teaching social skills classes for adolescents and adults with learning disabilities in the D. C. metropolitan area since 1986. She won the Ten Outstanding Young Americans Award from the U.S. Jaycees in 1994 for her work in developing the Americans with Disabilities Act and initiating the self-help movement for people with learning disabilities.

Workplace Social Skills: Do Your Students Measure Up?

By Sherry DeMoss

Of all of the learning disabilities an individual may experience, probably the most visible and most debilitating deficits lie in the area of social skills. Lack of appropriate social skills pervades an individual's entire life – at home, in school, in the community, and in the workplace. Herein lies the focus of this article – the workplace. Individuals with learning disabilities may be able to secure employment in areas where limited academic or technical skills are required, but because it is difficult to isolate oneself from all human contact on the work site, it may be difficult to keep the job.

There has been a great deal of research in the area of social skills – mostly directed at elementary and middle school levels. Recently, however, more interest has been directed toward the social skills required in the workplace. In a nationwide study of business, labor unions, and educational institutions, the Center for Public Resources found that 90 percent of people who had been fired were discharged because of poor attitudes, inappropriate behavior, and difficulties with interpersonal relationships, not because of deficiencies in job skills. Although social skills are obviously important in the workplace setting, few studies on the topic have been conducted.

One study of note was conducted by the Technical Related Academic Career Competencies (TRACC) Program at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Fishersville, Virginia. The TRACC Program was created to empower students to successfully complete vocational training through the provision of an occupationally-related program of academic assessment and instruction. We worked with employers throughout the state of Virginia during the implementation of the TRACC academic program. Many employers frequently cited poor social skills as problems in the workplace and asked if schools could begin teaching social skills, as well as academic and technical skills.

To address this need, the TRACC Workplace Social Skills Program worked with employers to identity specific social skills required for twenty-six occupations typically held by individuals with learning disabilities. The employers stated that they were willing to work with employees who were slow with technical skills or who needed some academic review; however, they were not willing to continue to employ individuals who could not get along with co-workers, accept constructive criticism, or follow directions.

Being able to monitor one's behavior by paying attention to the reactions of others, which comes naturally to most of us, must be taught to individuals with social skills deficits.

In an effort to identify specific workplace social skills requirements, the TRACC Program interviewed 145 Virginia employers. Front line supervisors representing various occupations, ranging from food services to computer-assisted drafting and electronics, were presented with a 64-item checklist and asked to rate the social behaviors listed as "essential," "helpful," or "not important" for success in the occupation they supervised.

Based on this employer survey, the TRACC Program developed a Workplace Social Skills Training Program which focuses on training the top ten essential social skills expected by the employers interviewed. The Program covers seven major areas of social skills development. Initially, four interrelated foundation skills, necessary for all types of social skills training are taught: verbal communication, nonverbal communication, social awareness, and social problem solving. When students have mastered skills in the four foundation areas, attention is directed toward workplace skills involving compliance, cooperation, and civility.

Verbal communication involves such skills as listening and attending, factoring in voice pitch, speed, and volume; staying with the topic of the conversation; establishing the participant's age, gender, and background; and personal relationships established. These skills typically involve what speech language pathologists refer to as pragmatic language skills, or knowing what to say, how to say it, and to whom to say it, as well as where and when it is to be said. Many of these skills are "unwritten rules" of social interaction. Typically, children learn from parents that there are certain topics that should not be discussed with everyone or that it is acceptable to scream at a basketball game but not in a public library. Individuals with social skills deficits may actually need to be taught such basic communication skills.

Nonverbal skills include interpreting facial expressions, body position, and gestures – skills that are often difficult for students with learning disabilities. One study found that students with learning disabilities had problems distinguishing a positive expression from a negative one when presented with pictures of various emotions. This inability to pick up on nonverbal cues is the cause for various misunderstanding and communication problems on the part of individuals with learning disabilities. Being able to monitor one's behavior by paying attention to the reactions of others, which comes naturally to most of us, must be taught to individuals with social skills deficits.

Students must learn to constantly scan their environment for social cues. Social awareness means paying attention to the feedback received from others. Are the nonverbal messages positive or negative? Do the nonverbal cues support what is being stated verbally? In a cause and effect type of setting, what is the individual doing to cause the response by the other party?

When an individual correctly identifies cues in the environment, the final foundation skill, social problem-solving, must be taught. Upon receiving a negative response, the individual must analyze what he or she is doing to elicit that response, and how his/her behavior can be modified to obtain a

more favorable reaction. The student then must learn to apply the problem-solving steps to identifying the problem behavior, generating possible alternatives, deciding on the most appropriate solution, implementing it, and evaluating its effectiveness. This process involves higher level, more sophisticated thinking skills, including alternative and divergent thinking, as well as evaluative or consequential thinking.

Results of the TRACC study indicated that the employers with whom TRACC was working most valued skills in the area of compliance. Behaviors such as demonstrating respect for authority, following directions, requesting assistance when needed, and accepting constructive criticism was rated most highly.

Secondly, employers expect employees to cooperate with supervisors and with co-workers to get the job completed. Employers want workers who can work as a member of a team, help others when needed, and be willing to have others help them as necessary.

Finally, employers appreciate civility on the part of employees. They want workers who have good manners; in fact, they felt so strongly about profanity that out of 64 items, "does not use profanity" was rated in the top ten. Employers believe that if employees are polite to them and co-workers, they will be socially appropriate with customers, or potential customers, and will not display any behaviors that customers find offensive.

Social problem solving is a very important skill which carries over from the foundation skills into the workplace skills. Every social encounter involves some level of problem solving. In the workplace, problem solving frequently surfaces with decision making tasks. The TRACC study found that larger businesses were willing to delegate more responsibility to workers than smaller companies. However, based on present trends, it appears in the future all workers will be expected to make increasingly complex decisions without the assistance of superiors.

To train the skills described above, the TRACC Workplace Social Skills Program utilizes a diagnostic-prescriptive approach. Individuals' strengths and weaknesses are assessed using various raters and three separate checklists. The ratings are compiled, and the professional responsible for providing social-skills training meets with the individual in a self-awareness conference to discuss demonstrated strengths and weaknesses. If the learner and the trainer agree on the deficits, social skills objectives are written into the Individual Education Program (IEP), the Individual Transition Plan (ITP), or the Adult Education Plan, and social-skills instruction is implemented. If the individual does not agree, the trainer will gather more information through additional observations, cite specific examples of unacceptable behavior, and meet with the individual again. Self-awareness is a goal of the program and is the bridge between diagnosis and instruction. Training should not begin until the individual understands his/her strengths and agrees that there are areas in need of modification.

The TRACC instructional component includes detailed activities and role-play situations for teaching the seven skill areas. Instruction is provided on a regular basis in a group setting. Information is included in the program describing how to set up a social skills training program, the length of time required, how to coordinate with other services, how to direct teaching methods, and how to make learning experiential for specific individuals.

It is important to note that social skills need to be trained over a lifespan. As soon as a social skill deficit is noted, social skills training should be added to the IEP or Adult Education Plan, and instruction provided throughout the individual's educational program.

Most employers are willing to provide job training; few are willing to invest their time or energy into developing workplace social skills. For

adults. Vocational Rehabilitation and other adult service agencies must expand services to include training in workplace social skills to assist individuals with learning disabilities to achieve success on the job. Additionally, for workers to optimally benefit from the provisions offered through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), they must be aware of their strengths and weaknesses in order to effectively advocate for themselves in the workplace.

The TRACC Workplace Social Skills Program was made possible by a grant funded by the National Center for Learning Disabilities in New York. The Program was written by Dr. Esther Minskoff, Professor of Special Education at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA.❖

Sherry DeMoss is the Director of the Technical-Related Academic Career Competencies Program at Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, Virginia. Speaking at international, state, and local levels, she has delivered numerous presentations related to vocational/academic integration, trade-related academics, relevancy in education, and workplace social skills.

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TECHNIQUES TO GENERALLY IMPROVE SOCIAL SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

✓Teach conversation skills through small group interaction and peer training.

✓Teach the difference between casual and intimate relationships.

✓Address the significance of body language and facial expressions.

✓Show by example the amount of distance that should be left between the employee and another.

✓Explain and model how to attend and respond to what someone is saying.

✓Illustrate how to express interest by using questions.

✓Clarify when and when not to discuss personal matters.

✓Identify situations where slang/profanity is inappropriate.

✓Demonstrate and practice how to handle interruptions and how and when it is appropriate to interrupt.

✓Practice how to graciously praise and pay sincere compliments.

✓Explain the difference between humor and sarcasm; provide examples of inappropriate humor.

✓Be honest about inappropriate behavior that is displayed.

✓Assist the employee in monitoring voice tones and emotions by providing direct feedback.

The above suggestions are from Nancie Payne, *consultant to employers and employees for workplace accommodations.*

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Developing Strategic Social Skills

By Robert Crawford

An employer related to me the story of a young man disappearing from work after he was told he was doing a great job. Later that day, when asked why he left, his reply was, "I didn't know what I was doing that was good and didn't want to disappoint the boss by not being able to do it again, so I just left!"

That story came back to me as I was reflecting on the power of social perception and its impact on the adult with learning disabilities (LD). In order to accept a compliment from an authority figure, one needs to know the difference between honest praise and generic platitudes. One must also be able to single out the behaviors that warranted the compliment and not get a "swollen" ego. Some adults with LD cannot do this because they lack the relevant social skills.

After thirteen years as Executive Director of the Life Development Institute (LDI), an independent living program for adults with LD and related disorders, I have come to expect most of our clients will have hit-or-miss social skills punctuated by embarrassing public failures, self-doubt and tendencies to blame others for their minimal social life. To assist adults with LD in developing strategic social skills, it is necessary to help these individuals challenge their distorted views of personal social competency based on past experiences and to provide them with opportunities to develop positive personality traits.

Social competency requires experiential learning as much as emotional maturity. If an adult with LD hasn't had much experience in developing relationships outside of his/her immediate family (and many haven't experienced success here either), then she or he may share similar experiences with the young employee mentioned at the start of this article.

Good social skills, like good work ethics, are developed through the process of putting in the work and paying your dues. This involves a certain amount of calculated risk-taking on the part of the adult with LD.

Common experiences shared by adults in the LDI Program have provided the following self-help list of useful strategies for dealing with common social encounters:

- I don't start rumors and I try not to listen to them. If I have an issue with someone, we deal with the problem face-to-face.
- If it appears that someone needs help with something, I always make sure to ask that individual first before getting myself involved.
- When I'm not sure how my boss feels about my work performance, I've learned to come into work early, request to speak to him or her privately and ask, "How can I do my job more effectively?"
- I've learned to weigh compliments and criticisms from my different friends and acquaintances more effectively by thinking about their tone of voice, facial expressions and body language. In this way, I usually know what they want and why they want it.
- When I get in a roommate dispute, I've learned to take a physical time out. This way, I am less likely to say something I will regret later.

- It has been really hard handling my feelings when I'm lonely, but I've learned that it takes time to develop a relationship with women/men. I shouldn't try too hard to impress them, but just be myself.

- I used to judge people by the way they looked until I figured out that I was really looking for some way to make myself feel better about who I was.

The underlying message of these individuals is one of "learning" how to approach social interactions in a manner other than that which had produced unsuccessful results in the past. New approaches were successful in leading to more personal satisfaction, happiness and competency.

Experience has shown that when an adult with learning disabilities has a clear understanding of his/her role in various social situations and has had practice developing positive personality traits based on respect of self and others around him or her, that person has an identity, a positive sense of worth and the desire to reach out and relate with others. Those of us who work with and are part of this population must instill in each other the belief that the "quality of one's social relations begins with me."❖

Robert Crawford is president and co-founder of the Life Development Institute (LDI). LDI offers co-ed, residential program designed to enhance workplace literacy, employability, and personal responsibility in making appropriate choices for preparing to compete in a global job market.

Dealing with Learning Disabilities in Relationships

By Brita Miller

Learning disabilities may present many challenges to the individual other than the obvious. They can have a great impact on relationships and personal interactions. The effects are experienced by persons with learning disabilities and their partners. The problems can manifest themselves in a variety of situations.

A person with learning disabilities may be frustrated about the way a partner provides assistance by feeling stifled when too much is routinely provided, which may give rise to the perception that he or she is stupid or being treated like a child. Also, he or she may feel unfairly blamed for relationship problems, such as not listening or not trying hard enough, which may be due to his/her learning disabilities.

The partner without learning disabilities may experience resentment at having to continually tend to the needs of the other, while many of his/her needs may seem to go unmet.

As everyone has good and bad days, so do individuals with learning disabilities, but theirs are often much more pronounced and frequent. Their capabilities can vary widely from day to day without any predictable patterns or identifiable causes.

Since learning disabilities often are not visible, both partners may have difficulty understanding and accepting the limitations they create. No matter who has the disability, the problems must be worked out together. It is important to distinguish between difficulties which can be overcome (using strategies and accommodations) and those which are not likely to change.

The following are some helpful tips that may be useful for partners who have learning disabilities:

- Have a good understanding of the way in which the learning disabilities affect your ability to process information, communicate, etc.

- Explain to your partner how the learning disabilities interfere with many aspects of everyday life.

- Request accommodations in a direct manner without feeling guilty or giving excuses.

- To maintain credibility with others; avoid "crying wolf."

- Accept that some tasks may take longer.

- Be as self-reliant as possible by finding alternatives to overburdening your partner.

These tips may be useful for the partner of a person who has a learning disability:

- Try to recognize, specifically, how the learning disability impacts your partner's ability to: pay attention, comprehend, conceptualize, visualize, communicate, be organized, follow conversations, interpret body language, etc.

- Be aware that what appears to be a simple and logical way to carry out a task for you may not be the most logical way for the person with learning disabilities. Persuading the partner to "just do it this way" is not necessarily helpful. Conversely, you should accept that what seems like a roundabout method may, in fact, be the easiest way for your partner to complete the task.

- Remember that the learning disability thought process may manifest itself in a nonlinear fashion, which may seem confusing.

- Refrain from demanding that your partner "try harder" to correct a disability. This would be like expecting a deaf person to hear by trying harder.

- Be aware that "symptoms" of the learning disabilities may be more apparent at the end of the day or when your partner is fatigued.

Socially constructed gender roles may compound the effects of learning disabilities. For instance, men have traditionally been designated as breadwinners. This has not been realistic for some men with learning disabilities who have had difficulties with job stability and career advancement. A couple can reduce the stress they feel by creating more realistic expectations and redefining their roles according to each person's abilities, rather than tradition.

Although couples may feel that learning disabilities are a unique problem, they are shared by a great number of people. Due to the close interaction of a relationship, the effects of learning disabilities are often greatly magnified, thus creating additional stress for the couple. It is only with hard work and a lot of understanding that these problems may be resolved.◆

Brita Miller is a board member of the Coalition for Adults with Learning Differences (CALD) and the Adult Issues Chair for the Learning Disabilities Association of California (LDA-CA). She is also a member of the California Rehabilitation Advisory Council and a member of the San Diego County Literacy Network.

Remembering the Adolescent Years

By Barbara Cordoni and Tara Cordoni-Ely

Editor's note: Barbara Cordoni is the mother of Tara Cordoni-Ely, a young adult doctoral student who has a learning disability. In the following article, they share their perspectives on social interactions within their family. From a mother's viewpoint, Barbara describes her experiences as a mother of a child with a disability. From a daughter's point of view, Tara includes advice to parents on how to help adolescents in their transition into adulthood.

A Mother's Viewpoint

As a mother of an adult with learning disabilities, I know that dealing with a learning disability is not easy for a parent or a child. When it is your child who can never find the homework or who didn't do it because she or he would rather appear forgetful than stupid, the frustration level can seem like it is reaching epic proportions. Parents plead, yell, even threaten, but things don't seem to get better. Of course, what we often don't consider is that things aren't getting better for our child either. Being the one with the learning disability, the child is the one experiencing the greatest difficulties - a point sometimes difficult for the parent to remember. Everybody is hurting.

Parents' egos are at stake, as well. Most parents are anxious for their children to be successful. Many want to brag about their honor roll student, their football hero. For those with children who have trouble being successful at school, who are rebelling against parental efforts, who may be using drugs or running away, these expressions of pride are often replaced with worry, fear, frustration or even anger.

One of the things each of us gets to do is to make our own mistakes. My daughter, Tara, and I both admit to making our share of mistakes. I was not as sensitive or wise as I wanted to be. As a single mother, I was responsible for feeding, clothing and educating four children, and I had to take care of my own needs as we. Tara had a boyfriend who I could not tolerate; at the same time, she was not fond of mine either. Through our personal conflicts, the one thing we did have going for us was that we loved each other.

I did everything I knew to be supportive of her teachers. Since I was a teacher myself, I knew what things I needed to support and what I should be questioning. The trouble was, Tara wasn't telling me everything that was happening. After she was grown up and told me about them, I asked why she had kept certain things from me. She said it hurt too much to tell.

By the time Tara was in junior high, we were in trouble. It was a hard time – no father in the home, coupled with very little money. No longer was she willing to let me work with her on homework. Working at a university provided me the opportunity to hire some of my graduate students to work with Tara. The graduate students were able to bring a new approach to her learning which I could no longer do. Since they were young and fun and not her mother, this arrangement worked well for quite some time.

I got other things right. I made little balls of cookie dough and popped them in her mouth when I knew she was preparing for a test. I called them courage pills, and we needed a lot of that. I tried to say, "Just do your best. No matter what, I love you."

A DAUGHTER'S VIEWPOINT

Many learning disabled teenagers' lives are turbulent. These young people may experience a sense of low self-esteem and a special kind of loneliness. In an attempt to be accepted socially, they may experiment with drugs. Some will engage in casual sex with dates in order to gain the date's social standing and because it may be one of the few things they think they can do well. Many don't know how to make small talk, let alone carry on a conversation. They feel that they don't fit in. They feel that they are stupid.

They often forget to do their homework; or do their homework and leave it at home; or simply decide that they will be unsuccessful in their attempts, so they do not even try. They are occasionally surprised by exams that had been announced in class.

Adults with LD need to be told what others may **assume** we already know.

The following are generalizations. They encompass some of my experiences as a daughter, as well as some of those of my friends with learning disabilities when we were struggling through the teenage years. Allow me to speak out for the teenager with learning disabilities.

We often need to be told what adults may **assume** we already know. No one ever told me to stay to the right when going up or down stairs or walking down a sidewalk. It took years of odd looks and near collisions for me to figure out this rule of safety and courtesy. No one explained that neighborhood blocks increase or decrease in increments of hundreds or that an office identified as 214 is located on the second floor of a building. It cannot be assumed that we know "simple" or "obvious" things. We may know that we should know how to perform certain tasks and, therefore, may be embarrassed to ask.

Teach us life skills and insist that we use them. We will need to know how to pay bills, use a credit card, budget our money, comparison shop, fill out tax forms and use a checkbook. We need structure, consistency and organization more than the average adolescent. Teach us to use a color-coded appointment book for important dates, appointments and assignments. Make sure it is used.

Establish predictable times for family events, such as sitting down for dinner every day at 6:00PM. Do not vary from this routine. Set rules and stick to them. Make the rules consistent for each child in the family. For instance, the curfew should remain the same for each child at the age of 16; not 12:00AM for your son and 11:00 P.M. for your daughter. And, to keep things consistent and respectable, you may need to organize your life before you can help your teenager. Rules must apply to you, as well. It's more important for an adolescent to have an organized life than an organized room.

Because belonging is a strong need for adolescents, listen and work with your child's "need" to dress according to the acceptable standards of her social group. Be flexible and open-minded so that if she weighs the choices, choosing one pair of designer-label jeans over the possibility of affording multiple pairs of no-name jeans, you can help make that happen.

When other teens are getting their drivers licenses at 16 (18 in some states) make sure that your teen has the same opportunity, even if you know that her depth perception or spatial relationships are not good; help make it happen. If you choose not to be her instructor, send her to driving school or find someone else to teach her. Encourage her to drive to important locations before an actual event. Driving the route affords her the time to pick out landmarks. Help her to judge about how long it takes to get from place to place.

Help the teenager find areas of his/her life in which success can be enjoyed. Get the young person involved in something she loves and feels good about, such as Explorer Scouts, spear fishing, rock climbing, rapelling or dirt bike racing, even if you are apprehensive or are not in agreement with the chosen activity.

Point out when she does something inappropriate so she will not repeat the behavior. Ignoring the behavior will not eliminate it. Teach her how to carry on a conversation, listen actively, maintain eye contact and ask questions.

And, finally, remember that you, the parent, are the safest person in the teen's life. She may blow up and take things out on you because she cannot express her frustration and rage at the real source. Understand this. Guide her. Help her to know when and how to start taking personal responsibility. She will trust you and will know that you love her.◆

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Selected Readings

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